

The Liver



What is my liver?

Your liver is one of the largest and most important organs in your body.

Where is my liver?

Your liver is behind the lower right part of your ribs. Your ribs help keep your liver from being injured.

What does my liver do?

Your liver is very important to your health. Your liver:

- Stores vitamins, sugars, fats and other nutrients from the food that you eat.
- Builds chemicals that your body needs to stay healthy.
- Breaks down harmful substances, like alcohol and other toxic (poisonous) chemicals.
- Removes waste products from your blood.
- Makes sure that your body has just the right amount of other chemicals that it needs.

What are some of the diseases that can affect my liver?

Many diseases can affect your liver. If you have one of these diseases, your liver may not work as well as it should.

Some of the most common diseases that can affect your liver include:

- **Viral Hepatitis** Hepatitis is a medical term that means “inflammation (swelling) of the liver.” Viruses that attack the liver cause some of the most common forms of hepatitis. In most cases, your doctor can use a simple blood test to see if you have been exposed to one of these viruses.

Three of the most common viruses that attack the liver are:

- **Hepatitis A Virus (HAV)** The hepatitis A virus is usually spread through dirty food and water. If you get hepatitis A, you may feel like you have the flu, and notice a yellowish color (called *jaundice*) in your skin or in the whites of your eyes. Just about everyone recovers from hepatitis A without any problems.
- **Hepatitis B Virus (HBV)** The hepatitis B virus is spread through blood, semen and vaginal fluid. You can get hepatitis B if you have sex with an infected person. You can also get hepatitis B if you share needles or works to inject drugs. Like HAV, HBV can make you feel sick for a short time. After that, most people with hepatitis B get better.

A small number (2%-6%) of people who get HBV infection have problems for a much longer time. In some cases, these problems can cause permanent liver damage. Following your doctor’s advice is the best way to make sure that you recover from HBV disease.

- **Hepatitis C Virus (HCV)** HCV is mainly spread through the blood. If you share needles or works to inject drugs, you have a high chance of getting HCV infection. People who had a blood transfusion before 1992 might find out that they are infected with HCV, as well.

Unlike the other hepatitis viruses, the virus that causes HCV may not make you feel very sick. In fact, you can be infected with the HCV and not even know it. Hepatitis C is still a serious illness. Most people who get HCV never get rid of the virus completely. Over time, it can cause permanent liver problems, including cirrhosis and liver cancer (see descriptions below).

- **Cirrhosis** Cirrhosis is a medical term that means “scarring of the liver.” When you have cirrhosis, large parts of your liver are damaged. Because it has been damaged, your liver may not work as well as it should.
Cirrhosis of the liver is often the result of drinking too much alcohol. Other common causes of cirrhosis include hepatitis, especially hepatitis C.
Cirrhosis can be very dangerous if it is not treated properly. It is important to follow your doctor’s advice if you have cirrhosis.
- **Liver cancer** Like many other body organs, your liver can get cancer. Liver cancer is a disease in which some of the cells in your liver begin to reproduce faster than they should. These cells form growths called tumors. Having hepatitis B or hepatitis C can increase your chances of getting liver cancer. Liver cancer can be deadly. If you find out that you have liver cancer, you need to get treated as soon as possible.

What are liver function tests (also called a liver panel)?

Your doctor can see how well your liver is working by looking at certain substances in your blood. When your liver is working well, the levels of these substances are low. When your liver is not working as well as it should, they can become much higher. These substances include liver *enzymes* (chemicals that your liver uses to do its work) and *bilirubin* (pronounced “billy-roo-bin”). *Albumin* (pronounced “al-byoo-men”) is a protein made by the liver. The albumin level is below normal when the liver is injured.

Your doctor will compare the results of tests on your blood with the results that are normal for most people. If your results are high, your doctor may suspect that you have a liver disease. Usually, your doctor will have to perform other tests to make sure.

How can I protect my liver from disease?

Your liver is one of the most important organs in your body, so it’s a good idea to keep it healthy. There are many things you can do to protect your liver, including:

- **Don’t have unsafe sex.**
- **Don’t inject drugs like heroin or cocaine.**
- **Don’t share any personal items that might have blood on them.**
- **Don’t drink alcohol.** Alcohol can also make liver diseases like hepatitis much worse.
- **Get vaccinations (shots) against HAV and HBV.** A simple series of shots can protect most people from getting infected with the viruses that cause hepatitis A and B. There is currently no vaccine against the virus that causes hepatitis C.
- **Make sure that the water you drink and the food you eat are clean.** Most cases of infection with HAV result from poor cleanliness, especially in restaurants and cafeterias.
- **If you take any medications, make sure your doctor knows about them.** Also tell your doctor about any over the counter medicines, supplements, natural or herbal remedies that you use. Certain medicines taken at the same time can cause damage to your liver, even if you can buy them without a prescription.

For more information and support call

- Your local VA Health Care facility and the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C web site (Internet address: <http://www.va.gov/hepatitisc>)
- The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line (1-888-4-HEPCDC or 1-888-443-7232) and web site (Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>)



- The American Liver Foundation 1-888-4HEP USA or 1-800-GO LIVER. Internet address: <http://www.liverfoundation.org>
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